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CITATION:

Marchildon, Sarah. Cancun saved the process, not the planet. SANSAI : An Environmental Journal for the Global Community 2011, 5: 123-129

ISSUE DATE:

2011-04-12

URL:

http://hdl.handle.net/2433/143604

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How do you solve a problem like climate change? How do you solve something so deeply embedded in our daily lives and — paradoxically — so far removed from it?

Climate change is not easily visualized as an immediate problem because, in the normal way we look at things, it isn't. It's everywhere and nowhere. It's not something those of us in the developed world can see, hear, touch or smell. We can only grasp it intellectually. And what we manage to grasp is the periphery of an issue so explosive that to navigate its surface is to risk detonating social, economic and political landmines.

It's no wonder most of us choose to tune out the rhetoric and stick our heads in the sand. Which is unfortunate because climate change is quite possibly the most important problem humanity has ever worked to solve.

It is also fundamentally unlike any other problem we have ever worked to solve. That's because climate change comes with a time limit. Every year that we don't deal with it, the problem just gets worse and worse. And at a certain point, it will be too late to fix it. There will be too many emissions in the atmosphere and no way back to a world that isn't buffeted by uncontrollable, catastrophic climate change.

So how do you solve a problem like climate change? It's a question that has been on my mind lately, mostly because I just finished a three-month internship with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat. Whenever journalists put the question to Christiana Figueres, the head of the UNFCCC, she speaks about how climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution. It's an answer that makes intuitive sense, which probably explains why this line of thinking has been guiding international efforts on climate change for the past two decades.

Since 1992, the UNFCCC has been trying to solve climate change in a structured way with the consensus of world governments. Of course, this is easier said than done. Trying to get 194 countries to move together in the same direction on climate change feels less like building consensus and more like herding cats.

I got to peek behind the curtain of the multilateral climate change process during my internship with the UNFCCC and what I saw wasn't pretty — mostly a whole lot of countries doing a whole lot of nothing. I came away from the experience more convinced than ever that something has to change. And by "change" I don't mean

changing a few light bulbs. I mean fundamentally changing the reptilian part of our brain that cares only about the here and now.

We are strange animals

Human beings are strange animals, especially when it comes to changing our behaviour. Even those of us who cycle to work and eat organic vegetables are stubbornly resistant to change. I'm speaking from experience here. I spent seven years working at a Canadian environmental organization. This was a place filled with the kind of people you'd expect to work at an environmental organization — the kind of people who would rather swallow a bucketful of nails than drink non-fair-trade coffee out of a Styrofoam cup.

But despite having PhDs and fancy titles like "marine biologist" on their business cards, not one of them could keep the office kitchen clean. They would spill coffee grounds without sweeping them up or leave dirty dishes in the sink for someone else to wash. Some of our most heated staff meetings were not about the state of the planet but about the state of the kitchen. It always struck me that the kitchen was a microcosm of the world at large. Here we were, a group of committed environmentalists, struggling to change our own bad behaviour while urging governments to do the same thing. It always seemed a little disingenuous. How can we possibly expect governments to keep their Kyoto commitments when we can't even keep the kitchen clean?

Sometimes I think we are a failed species. Or — to be a bit more kind — an incredibly stupid species.

We don't live in an infinite world and yet we act as if we do. We act as if the ocean will never run out of fish or the ground will never run out of oil. Almost everything in our daily lives, from the food we eat to the cars we drive, is powered by polluting fossil fuels. Cheap oil makes the industrialized world go round. We are tethered to a shortsighted economic system that is pulling us directly toward our own extinction.

It makes no sense to continue doing things the same way we've been doing them for the past 200 years. It's not working. Something has to change. We need an energy revolution as profound as the industrial revolution. Fifty years from now, I want to be able to tell my grandchildren stories about the inefficient cars we used to drive and the energy we used to waste. I want to see them roll their eyes at how stupid we were.

The way I see it, human beings are hardwired to solve climate change. Foresight is one of our greatest evolutionary advantages. Unlike other animals, we can conceptualize the future. This ability to look ahead has been the key to our survival as a species up until now. And it will be the key to our continued survival. We can look ahead 50 years into the future and decide we don't want to live in world buffeted by

floods, droughts and heatwaves. We can use this gift of foresight to change the path we're on.

Our collective brainpower has put people into space, cured diseases and unraveled the mysteries of DNA. There's no limit to our ingenuity and creativity. Surely we can figure out how to tread more lightly on the Earth and stop gobbling up its resources like pigs at the trough.

Kyoto Protocol targets are pathetically insufficient

So what's the answer? How do we make this happen? If we go back to the starting point and accept that climate change is a global problem that requires a global solution, then the multilateral climate process and the existence of the UNFCCC are definitely steps in the right direction. The good news is that we already have in place a framework for international action on climate change. The bad news is that the targets in this framework are pathetically insufficient.

The world's top scientists tell us increases in global temperatures must be kept to no more than two degrees celsius above preindustrial levels to avoid the worst consequences of climate change. In order to limit temperature rise to two degrees, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that global emissions have to peak by 2015 and then drop to 50 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050. But a coalition of more than 100 countries says those numbers do not go far enough. The Alliance of Small Island States and the group of Least Developed Countries — two key negotiating blocs in the UNFCCC process — say temperature rise must be limited to 1.5 degrees celsius to ensure the survival of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people (their mantra is "1.5 to stay alive"). That means cutting global emissions at least 85 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050.

The Kyoto Protocol contains targets that are far too small to achieve any of these goals. Current targets from industrialized countries would put the world on a path to at least three degrees in temperature rise — a level that would have disastrous consequences. If we are serious about solving climate change, we need to be much more ambitious. We need targets in line with what science requires.

But this is where things get tricky. International negotiations are complicated by fundamental differences of positions, which have yet to be resolved. Countries will have to find a way to work through several key differences, including differences of historical responsibility, differences in development and differences in geographic vulnerability to climate change. International cooperation on deeper emission cuts will be impossible unless these issues can be resolved. This is no easy feat. I have experienced the multilateral negotiation process first hand and I know how incredibly complex and difficult these meetings can be.

Just like being on the Titanic

Since 1995, representatives of countries from around the world have gathered at the annual Conference of the Parties to hammer out the details of international action on climate change. The scale of these conferences is enormous. For two weeks each year, thousands of negotiators, politicians, heads of state, journalists, celebrities, business people, academics, youth activists and environmentalists converge in a frenzy of activity. Because there are so many high-profile people in one place, security is always a big concern. You get used to seeing metal fences and police with machine guns everywhere you go. Passing your bag through an X-ray machine and walking through a metal detector become as much a part of your daily routine as brushing your teeth. The security checkpoints, scanners, X-ray machines, fences and road closures make you feel as if you are entering a gigantic hermitically sealed bubble when you walk through the conference doors. And, in a way, you are. You are entering a universe unto itself with a language unto itself. Everyone at the conference speaks in abbreviations: CDM, JI, REDD, SBSTA, SBI, AWG-KP, AWG-LCA. The numbingly dull list goes on and on (and we wonder why we're not winning the hearts and minds of the general public).

The 16th Conference of the Parties, or COP 16 for short, was held last December in Cancun, Mexico, at a massive beachfront resort. You could work, eat and sleep without ever setting foot outside the compound. There were computer stations, conference rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms and 24-hour restaurants. It's what I imagine being on a cruise ship is like, minus the onboard entertainment (unless you count as entertainment the small contingent of oddballs that always turns up at these conferences — such as the woman registered as "Supreme Master" or the one who tried to sneak her way in by claming to be Leonardo DiCaprio's girlfriend). It felt like we were trapped on the Titanic, sailing full-steam ahead to a collision with disaster (except the iceberg in this version was melting).

Sitting in on international climate change negotiations requires a strong stomach, endless reserves of patience and a suppressed gag reflex. I watched as negotiations on a draft text to enhance public awareness and education began with 45 minutes of bickering over the wording of one sentence in the opening paragraph (who knew negotiators were such sticklers for the English language?). And this was one of the least nasty, least confrontational negotiating sessions.

The long semantic debate over whether to use "challenge" or "major impediment" was threatening to derail the session until the negotiator from the Dominican Republic took control of the floor. She reminded everyone that if negotiators did nothing but pick apart the words in the preamble, the clock would run out before they could get to anything substantial. Or, to borrow a line from the equally rankled Japanese negotiator: "We need to stop chewing on the bread and start eating the meat."

Forty-five minutes later, a draft decision was adopted. This accomplishment was hailed as a major success. And if you think that doesn't sound like much, it is when you consider the entire multilateral process was in danger of falling apart in Cancun.

Cancun saved the process, not the climate

Expectations for the Cancun conference were extremely low after the disastrous meeting in Copenhagen the year before. The UNFCCC could not afford another failure. If delegates had left Cancun without any sort of progress, it could have been the final nail in the coffin for the multilateral climate process.

But it didn't fall apart. Countries agreed to compromise and cooperate, and China and the US did not throw darts at each other the way they did in Copenhagen.

This desperation to reach some sort of conciliatory agreement made for a dramatic ending to the conference. During the final hours of the final night, country after country pledged its support for an agreement that would keep the process going. Except for Bolivia. It was the only country that opposed the outcome of the conference. Bolivia's ambassador to the UN angrily accused other governments of being recklessly unambitious. He simply refused to budge without an agreement strong enough to match the urgency of climate change. In a voice strained with anger, he said leaving Cancun without deep, legally binding targets was tantamount to genocide. That we would be directly responsible for the deaths of millions of people.

I sat on the floor in the back of the conference room feeling like I was witnessing a pivotal moment in history. Never mind why the Bolivian ambassador was saying what he was saying, he was the only one willing to drop diplomacy's polite and non-confrontational style of speaking and instead be brutally honest. And while his refusal to cooperate certainly wasn't doing the process any favours, his message needed to be heard.

Bolivia's intransigence only strengthened the resolve of other countries to push forward and keep the conference on track. And so, in the early hours of Saturday morning, the president of the conference banged her gavel and approved the adoption of the Cancun agreements despite a lack of consensus. In the interest of saving the process, she had decided to overrule Bolivia's objections.

The move was met with thunderous applause, standing ovations and congratulatory handshakes. The atmosphere of euphoria seemed strangely out of place, like someone wearing a tuxedo while paddling a canoe. There was a jarring disconnect between the level of excitement and what had actually been achieved. Was I the only one seeing the big picture here? What exactly were these people congratulating each other for — 20 years of doing nothing?

It's important to put what happened into perspective. Cancun may have saved the

process but it didn't save the planet. It restored the credibility of the UNFCCC but, in terms of fighting climate change, very little of substance was achieved. The Cancun agreements are full of loopholes. They contain no dates or deadlines. They promise a new flow of money from developed to developing countries by establishing a new climate fund but they do not include a specific dollar amount. They involve no commitment or action.

This is not the fault of the UNFCCC or the multilateral process itself. It is the fault of countries that, for shortsighted political and economic reasons, demand low targets. It is the fault of countries that come to the negotiating table year after year to obstruct rather than push for progress.

These thinly veiled attempts to kill the Kyoto Protocol have brought negotiations to a virtual standstill. The pace of international climate change talks is now so grindingly slow it's no wonder almost nothing gets accomplished. Developed countries have been the biggest foot-draggers, unwilling to break their dependence on cheap oil at the expense of the world's poorest people. This north-south divide is one of the biggest roadblocks to progress. Climate change is hitting the poorest first and hardest — hundreds of thousands of people in developing countries have already died from the floods, droughts and heatwaves that global warming is unleashing. They did not cause the problem and they lack the resources to stop it. And yet developed countries continue to call on developing countries to take on legally binding targets while refusing to cut their own emissions in any meaningful way. The hypocrisy is breathtaking.

The developed countries, which emitted the vast majority of the greenhouse gases that are warming up the atmosphere, agreed to act first. But they never did. And now they're just digging their heels in deeper. In Cancun, Canada, Japan and Russia tried to block the extension of the Kyoto Protocol beyond 2012. In Copenhagen, the US called for a whole new agreement with legally binding targets for developing countries. In Poznan, the US and EU tried to bully emerging economies like China and India into taking on emission reduction targets. The Kyoto Protocol is still alive but it's on life support.

Where do we go from here?

It is clear that we are going to need massive economic, cultural and political change if we want to avoid the worst impacts of climate change in the coming decades.

I truly believe the UNFCCC is an essential part of the overall response. But international efforts need to be bolstered by efforts from all of us. And I really mean all of us — individuals, governments, businesses, schools and industries. Maintaining the status quo is not an option.

Things have to change from the top down and the bottom up. The midpoint

between the two is where the climate change battle can be won. If we want to shift the level of ambition and political will that countries bring to the international negotiating table, we need to ramp up public concern on the issue. Without public pressure for strong action, countries will be able to continue to push for weak targets at international climate negotiations. Ministers will be able to continue to return home from these meetings and ignore the problem until the next summit. Without public support for immediate action, international negotiations will continue to go nowhere and emissions will continue to rise.

But this goes to the crux of the problem. How do we engage the public when climate change is not easily visualized as an immediate problem? How do we get the public excited about an international process that is filled with complex terms and countries that come to obstruct progress?

Climate change is no longer just a political or a scientific challenge; it has also become a communications challenge. It is a challenge to environmental organizations to reach beyond the converted. It is a challenge to the UNFCCC to use less of the impenetrable and numbingly dull language that appeals only to insiders. It is a challenge to governments that care about the issue to put a bigger priority on public awareness. It is a challenge to scientists to get creative when communicating the results of their research.

The window of opportunity to prevent uncontrolled climate change is still open but the longer we wait, the sooner it will slam shut. There is no question that something needs to change. The question is will we be the ones who change things now or will we wait for a major ecological collapse to change things later?

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